



Claudine Piaton, Ezio Godoli and David Peyceré (dir.)

Building Beyond The Mediterranean Studying The Archives of European Businesses (1860-1970)

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Introduction

Mercedes Volait

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Interest in European architecture beyond Europe, particularly in the Mediterranean, is currently thriving. But specialists are aware that the field is not easy to document, should they wish to go beyond the usual material provided by architectural journals in European languages. In many cases, it is biased or limited to a survey of what survives on the ground. Research is complex and difficult for many reasons: sources are dispersed north and south of the Mediterranean, there are no dedicated research centers, and access to documentation fluctuates from one country to another. Given such circumstances, this initial panorama of the resources offered by the archives of contracting companies based in Europe is quite an achievement.

Since 2002, these research teams have been studying modern architecture in the Mediterranean.¹ They have identified the archives of European companies active in the region from 1850 as a rich source of information. In many cases, company archives are the only source for visual records of one or another construction or worksite. This is the case for Hennebique Reinforced Concrete, an engineering office that has preserved unequalled Mediterranean imagery, well identified since 2003.² Likewise, certain companies documented the important role they were playing as developers. The Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez built several Egyptian cities from 1862 on.³ Even the fraternal benefit society that accompanied the Italian migration across the Mediterranean commissioned significant developments in housing and facilities in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya.⁴ These preliminary findings were an invitation to continue the exploration; this has now been achieved with the present publication. It contributes its own lot of fascinating discoveries: surprising projects (in the field of monument restoration), unknown partnerships (occasioned by big jobs like the reconstruction of the great temples of Nubia), and concepts of urbanism (in the case of mining towns, for example).

Research is certainly far from being completed. Investigations into crafts like wrought iron and mosaic have only just begun. Many companies involved in finishing work have never been studied – for example, the British manufacturers,

Critall, flooded the international market with steel window from the 1850s. Schindler elevators were trading regularly with Mediterranean construction contractors from the 1900s. All of this unpublished material is of interest not only to research; the information it provides is also useful for those who work on the conservation of recent heritage. Possessing accurate and reliable information on building techniques and materials is a guarantee of sustainable and high quality restoration, when the time for redevelopment and reuse comes. Construction archives in the Mediterranean are still under-used by architectural historians, who are more familiar with the archives of architects. They are indeed unevenly inventoried in public collections because they require specialized knowledge on non-European contexts. They are furthermore troublesome for companies lacking dedicated archival departments. However, for both research and restoration, they constitute a unique asset, and a cultural heritage that deserves to be preserved and enhanced. May this volume provide the demonstration of this, and convince the holders of contracting archives of the potential slumbering in their filing cabinets.